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COVER STORY
PART 1

The Time May Be Right for an Old Pro

SUMMARY: Someone will succeed Ronald Reagan in the Oval Office, and as far as Robert Dole is concerned, it ought to be him. The Kansas senator has a strongly conservative record, but pragmatism and populism are also important aspects of his politics. Dogging his undeclared candidacy is the memory of 1976, when his stingy wit left a bad taste with some people.

Sen. Robert J. Dole of Kansas wants to be president. He has for a long time. He tried and failed in 1980. But now, following two years as the Senate's very public and very powerful majority leader, he thinks his time has come. The first thing he tells his Republican audiences is that *somebody's* time is coming. He knows that many of them just have not quite accepted the fact the Reagan era is coming to a close.

"They're not going to leave the office vacant," he says to every crowd. "There will be an election." He pauses. "And someone will succeed Ronald Reagan."

With this context set, the next step sounds eminently logical. He tells them he is eminently qualified and eminently available.

He has some advantages. He is well-known as the leading Republican in the Senate and husband of the secretary of transportation. Name recognition alone is enough to place him high in the early voter preference polls.

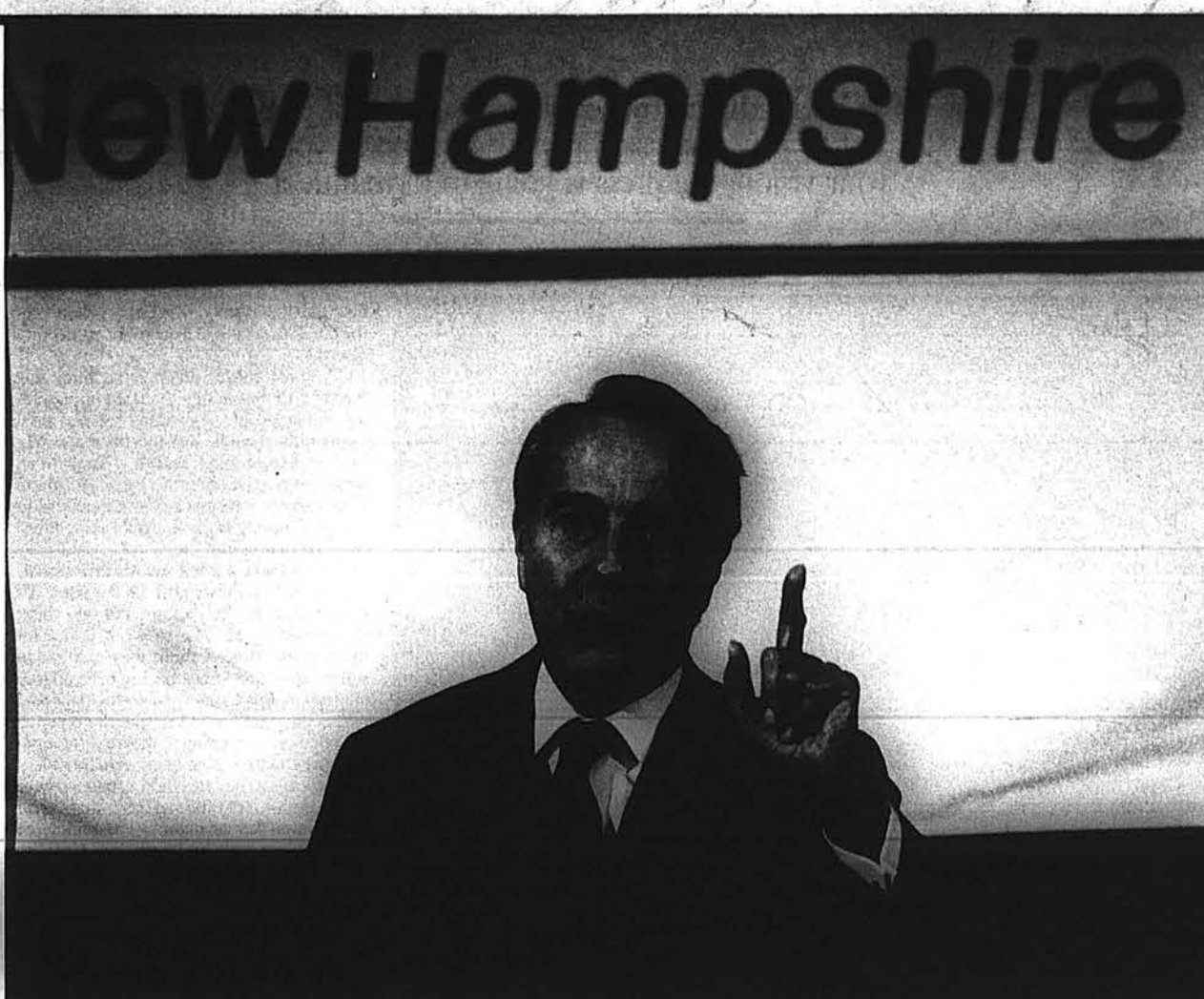
He also has a real advantage these days. Although the Iran-Contra affair has created problems for all the Republican candidates, it appears to have hurt Vice President George Bush the most. When the story broke, Dole caught and even passed Bush in the early caucus and primary state polls.

As the dust settles, they are still running close. But inside the Capital Beltway, Dole is increasingly considered the man to beat for the Republican nomination.

This makes Bob Dole a man to watch, and he is doing all he can to make sure people watch. He has not announced formally, but he is running for the Republican presidential nomination, and running hard.

He opens most speeches now with a recap of the big Highway Bill veto battle he fought and lost in March with many of the voters in keenly politicized Iowa and New Hampshire watching on television.

"I was summoned to the White House by the president," he says. "He was standing there with the secretary of transportation. And he said, 'Would you like to help us on this bill?' Well, what was I going to



In speeches such as this one in Manchester, he tells why he would be the hands-on president studies say voters want.

say? I said, 'Sure.'"

The veto pick was a tough one for Dole and all Republican lawmakers from the West and Midwest. There was money in the bill for their states, and it contained authorization for states to raise the speed limit on interstate highways from 55 mph to 65 mph. Everybody with a flivver or a motor scooter in the wide open West wants that new speed, indeed. Republicans proposed the change in the first place.

But Reagan had denounced the bill as a budget buster because of some of the projects in it. He was asking for Republican loyalty in the face of a Democratic Party juggernaut. And Dole is campaigning against budget busting and the federal deficit. He is also campaigning as a Republican. So he supported the president and now denounces the budget busters and praises the president. Then, at some point after this, he cracks: "I would have brought Elizabeth with me tonight, but she's out there changing all those highway signs."

It's not that good a joke, but people laugh outrageously. They catch the quip. And he has made his point: He's against

big spending bills and for local needs and strong for faster driving.

A neat trick, and one he pulls on virtually every issue and with consistent success even among the most sophisticated audiences. And it is necessary, too, for Bob Dole to be for and against the president at the same time. For Reagan has become an issue. His lefton has peeled seriously in the Iran-Contra flap. Analysis and candidates think there may be a general backlash that could hurt any Republican running—not as serious as the Watergate burning they took in 1976 but still a problem.

Robert E. Ellsworth, Dole's campaign manager, points to the fact that Dole has one of the best records in Congress for supporting the president and says, "Reagan has done a lot of wonderful things for this country." But he also points out: "Dole's been through a lot of presidents, and when he feels he can offer some constructive suggestions to the president (e.g., disagreement), he doesn't hesitate to do so. That's part of his responsibility."

Dole is more given to hoping it will all go away. "My view is I think we haven't

reached quite a point yet, but I would guess in another three or four months it's not going to make much difference to [an audience] how much time I spend talking about Ronald Reagan," he says. "They want you to talk about Bob Dole and what Bob Dole's going to do, because they've got to decide, not on Ronald Reagan's past but on somebody else's future."

And that, perhaps, is the silver lining in the impact that the Iran-Contra affair has had on Republican candidates for president; they cannot simply act like Reagan clones but must make the case for themselves. "I think you're going to see most of us moving on our own, not trying to make Reagan an issue but trying to get people to focus on us," says Dole. "As I keep saying, one of us might get elected. You ought to know what we stand for."

The chief issue in his campaign right now is whether there should be a central issue, as Washington tries to force Dole into



Having served under six presidents, Dole doesn't hesitate to offer suggestions.

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After a speech in Council Bluffs, Iowa: Being well-known is a major advantage.

the mold expected of candidates. Media pundits and Dole supporters alike have been demanding of him a "vision" along the lines of the Reagan revolution or Rep. Jack Kemp's renaissance of supply-side economics.

Ellsworth said absolutely not, and soon out in a power struggle for control of the campaign Dole has said he settled on his campaign manager because Ellsworth is concentrating on Dole's interests and not those of the visionaries.

"Let me tell you one thing," Ellsworth says, Kansas City thickening in his eye. "One thing that I will guarantee you, and that is that Dole will not be packaged as a candidate, and he will not be manipulated as a candidate. There have been a lot of people wasting a lot of their time and energy trying to package him and trying to manipulate him like they thought he ought to be. But it will not happen. I promise."

Dole just says no.

"I've been advised by people I have a lot of respect for not to play the vision game," he says. "Not yet. As soon as you have your vision, the press is going to dismantle it for you. And then, Oh! this is the guy's vision! No, then you say, 'Well, then, I'm going to get another vision.' I think at the appropriate time I've got to have the Dole plan on the economy, on the deficit, on monetary policy, all those things. How am I different? What would

happen if I got elected, in other words? So, we'll have all that stuff."

Simply, Dole is running as the man who gets things done, a pro, an expert, a pol, and in all this there is an implicit criticism of the amateurism with which the Reagan team has gone about many of its duties. Still, when "all that stuff" tells into a Dole agenda, it may surprise some people. Though he is a rock-ribbed Midwestern conservative, in good standing with the Republican Party's right wing and a fiscal tightwad, there is a populist side to his politics.

He would not be a Wall Street president. A large part of his attitude comes from his own struggles with adversity and his knowing people who were down and out through no fault of their own. Welfare queen jokes would disappear from the White House.

"No," he says. "I never have bought that. I mean, I think there are a lot of people who may have made it on their own. I don't suggest that some of these very good conservatives haven't risen from the ashes, so to speak. But I think you have to recognize that some people for many, many reasons aren't going to be able to do that. Maybe there aren't any jobs. Maybe they don't

have the opportunity. Maybe they didn't get the break that I got or you got or somebody else got."

"I think conservatism is a thing that means different things to different people. For some people it's voting against civil rights bills. I think just the opposite. My view is give people freedom, give them an opportunity, give them a chance, let them vote. Others, it means economic policy. To others it's strong defense. And I share those two interpretations."

"And others, I don't say it's intentional, but it's sort of a disregard for the poor. It's not because you're callous, but you think they ought to be able to work it out for themselves. Well, I think they're right in some cases. I do know, having been county attorney all those years and seeing the poorest people, you could see [them] come off the highways, sleeping in their cars at night with the children, and there were homeless 40 years ago. They just didn't show up here on the grades. And the sad cases that I'd be called in on late at night or the middle of the night and have to get the Red Cross to give them enough money to buy enough gas to get to the next town."

"So, I don't know. I think there are a lot of those things that certainly may have an impact on you. If you're so insensitive things like that don't have any impact, why, it's pretty bad."

Dole does make him the most decorated of all creatures to the ideological Republican—a pragmatist. "I think to a certain extent," he grants. "I mean, I'm not going to surrender principle. But I think sometimes you have to be flexible, and I think that's one of the president's strengths that he doesn't get credit for. Ronald Reagan is a conservative, but he's also smart enough to know that you're better off to get 90 percent of the pie than get none of it."

But first you have to get elected, and Dole is starting off by putting his best foot forward: his lifetime of public service in a variety of offices. He thinks the country is tired of visionaries and outsiders promising to shake up Washington and work miracles. He thinks they are ready for a seasoned hand who can manage the store.

"I went to a lunch yesterday with some of these CIO types and, boy, that's what they were talking about: experience. You know, the government. I think rightly or wrongly the perception is that Jimmy Carter was an outsider, and secondly, with this Iran thing, they're beginning to think maybe Reagan was another governor and an outsider. And I think the pendulum is swinging back a little bit and it helps some-

body like myself." Then he adds: "Even more than Bush, because Bush has been more of a ceremonial player. He hasn't been a policymaker." He offers another implicit criticism of a party tenet—rival Kemp's economic theories of low taxes, unfettered markets and automatic economic growth—whenever he mentions the federal budget deficit. "It's not going to go away. And it's not going to grow away."

Dole takes quite seriously some studies done with focus groups in Iowa and New Hampshire in which the subjects discussed informally what they want in the next president. "The bottom line was that the American voters are looking for a hands-on type of candidate for president, somebody who understands the government, somebody who knows how to make it work, somebody who would be sensitive to the needs of the American people. And I think that's really going to be the battleground in the next several months."

Then he explains to his listeners why he is that kind of candidate. "I've been in the Congress now for over a quarter of a century," he tells a Sioux City audience, "eight years in the House and on my 18th year in the Senate. During that time, I've been on the Agriculture Committee all that time, eight years in the House and all the time in the Senate. I've also been chairman of the Finance Committee, which deals with issues like taxation, estate taxes, Medicare, Medicaid, unemployment compensation."



The courthouse: Birthplace of a career



Dole and Simpson with Howard Greene (left) and chief of staff Sheila Burke

Social Security, a whole host of issues that I think are important to all the people here today."

"While on the ag committee, I was chairman of the wheat and feed grains [subcommittee], ranking member of that for years. I also served as chairman of the nutrition [subcommittee], maybe not a committee that many people here really care about, but it deals with programs that affect low-income Americans. We dealt with the WIC program [which helps with the nutrition needs of pregnant women and infants], we dealt with the school lunch program, we dealt with the food stamp program."

Then he really piles on the qualifications. "In addition to those responsibilities, I've also had the honor and privilege to be the Republican leader in the Senate. And in that position you get to deal with everything. Even some things you may not want to deal with, whether it's foreign policy or tax policy or domestic policy or trade deficits or federal deficits or visiting dignitaries and leaders."

Meanwhile, other than pushing his experience, the things Dole talks about come across more as topics than issues, the predictable list of things wrong in Washington, the nation and the world.

He begins with the federal budget deficit. Since it was Dole as Senate majority leader who pushed through Reagan's 1981 tax cuts, this one is tricky, but he handles it by simply saying they may have gone too far and it's time to call a halt. The validity of his choice of issue is suggested by the fact that this is the first question raised from the audience in many of the town meetings he holds with voters.

"I've got to believe that if you care about your children and your grandchildren, you're going to have to insist that the next president put his prestige on the line in an effort to reduce the federal deficit," he says. "It's \$2.3 trillion. Now, that figure's so

large it's almost meaningless. But here's another figure: we're paying about \$200 billion a year in interest on the debt, which is more than it cost to run the government in the early 1960s. We could do a lot for farmers, a lot for students, a lot for a lot of people—senior citizens, disabled Americans, people who can't find work. If we weren't paying \$200 billion in interest on the debt."

The first thing he would do if elected, he says, would be to call a meeting of all the top leaders of both parties in Congress and sit down and grapple with the deficit until they come up with a program to control it.

Trade is the next thing he mentions, the serious imbalance between what the United States exports and what it buys from abroad. At once he supports the president and does not sound too different from Democratic critics of the laissez-faire administration.

"Our markets should be open and countries should have access where they're competitive to our markets, where that country's markets are open to us and we have access where we're competitive. But it's got to be a two-way street, and that's the difficulty we're having right now."

Dole reminds audiences that the country is not at war anywhere and praises President Reagan's defense buildup. He also praises the Strategic Defense Initiative and says it is responsible for bringing the Soviets to arms talks. But he also likes to remind audiences of the danger and the need for a hard bargainer to continue when Reagan leaves.

Let's remember who we're dealing with across the table in Geneva," he tells a meeting of retirees from Marxist countries. "These are the people who drop bombs, trapped boys out of airplanes in Afghanistan so they will blow the arms and legs off Afghanistan children."

"I don't trust the leadership of the Soviet